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For immediate release

Argonne National Laboratory to look back, ahead as it marks Earth Day, hosts aspiring female scientists

ARGONNE, Ill. (April 16, 2010) — On April 22, 2010, the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Argonne National Laboratory will give a nod to the past while looking to the future. The laboratory, one of the largest research and development facilities in the world, will simultaneously mark the 40th anniversary of Earth Day while demonstrating to 350 young women from Chicago-area high schools why a career in science might be right for them.

The day-long Science Careers in Search of Women conference, the 23rd such event held at Argonne, puts students face-to-face with scientists from a wide variety of disciplines and provides an opportunity to interact with positive female role models. Students attending the event will see first-hand what science and technology careers are all about. More than 7,000 young women have participated in the program since it began at Argonne in 1987.

In recognition of Earth Day, the event's keynote speaker will be Cristina Negri, an agronomist and soil scientist who leads Argonne's research efforts in using plants and trees to help clean the environment — a field known as phytotechnologies or phytoremediation. Her talk will be titled "Mountains, Roots and Doctors of the Earth."

Negri joined the lab in 1992 and has been actively involved in Argonne's Women in Science and Technology (WIST) program.

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Science Careers in Search of Women—add one

"This is an excellent opportunity for the girls to see what a tremendous impact they can have through careers in science and technology," said Negri. "If no one shows these young women how cool it is to be a scientist or engineer, it's harder for them to see themselves in those roles."

"I like to brag that I have the biggest lab at Argonne," Negri added, referring to the work she does on some of Argonne's 1,500 acres. Her environmental research includes using plants like switchgrass or poplar trees as biofuel crops. These plants may also purify water and soil as they grow.

"Many times research has a single focus —only crops, only fuel, only environmental remedies. If you put all three together, you can often make one's waste a resource for the other. That's how we started thinking of plants as agents of environmental cleanup and restoration. And the same plants could be the next generation of sustainable biofuels," added Negri.

Students will participate in panel discussions with speakers from a variety of scientific and engineering disciplines, including biology, chemistry, physics, computer science and engineering. They will also have the opportunity to tour several different laboratories at Argonne, as well as visit career booths.

"It is important for the girls to see all of the science and engineering all around them and all of the different possibilities that exist," said conference co-chair and Argonne physicist Kawtar Hafidi.

At lunchtime, students will be matched by their areas of interest with a scientist in that field to provide an opportunity for more informal, one-on-one conversation.

"Women are still under-represented in scientific and engineering fields," said Hafidi. "Having these young women meet with successful female scientists is an important way to show them that, contrary to gender stereotypes, this is a career path that is accessible to them."

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Science Careers in Search of Women—add one

Research shows that young women often lose interest in scientific and technical fields of study, even before entering college.

"For the past 23 years we have been working to inspire young women to become our next generation of scientists and engineers," said conference co-chair Harold Myron, director of Argonne's Division of Educational Programs. "A lot of good has come out of the program, and we hope to continue encouraging young women to pursue all of the different opportunities that are available to them."

Besides reaching out to students, the conference has also benefited women researchers at Argonne by fostering networking opportunities that led to the formation of the laboratory's Women in Science and Technology program, which supports the DOE's commitment to recruit, retain and promote women to diversify and strengthen the scientific workforce.

The conference is sponsored by Argonne's Office of the Director, the lab's Division of Educational Programs, Argonne's Women in Science and Technology Program and the DOE's Office of Science.

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